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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 001856

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV SOCI KISL QA

SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: THE DISCUSSION THAT DID NOT
TAKE PLACE

REF: DOHA 910

Classified By: Ambassador Chase Untermeyer for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) The Amir's decision in May to lease land for the building of churches (reftel) surfaced in non-Qatari Arab and western newspapers at the end of October and early November. At issue was the degree to which the churches would be welcomed by Qatari society. The fact that it appeared primarily in the foreign press indicates that the GOQ considers the issue potentially sensitive. The incident also illustrated the degree to which the authorities maintain indirect but effective control of the press in Doha.

2. (C) Contrary to post's expectations, no public announcement followed the Amir's May decision to allow churches to be built in Qatar -- a decision that will make Saudi Arabia the only Gulf state that does not allow this freedom. The months passed without another word on the matter until October 20, when the story was carried by the Associated Press. (The Archbishop of Canterbury had held a fund-raiser at Lambeth Palace on October 6 for the Qatar church project, where the A.P. probably picked up on the story.) The article quoted the Nicosia-based Anglican bishop and the Qatari lawyer and former Minister of Justice, Najeed al-Nuaimi. Al-Nuaimi said that few Qataris would approve of the decision, that their religious sensibilities would be "insulted," and that many Qataris were upset by the country's "westward tilt."

3. (C) The story ran in the UAE-based English-language Gulf news October 23, and a three-sentence article was published in one of Doha's English-language papers on October 24. The story then appeared in an article in the Egyptian weekly "Al Qahira" on November 1 which included al-Nuaimi's remarks. Back in Doha, the story appeared in English November 3 without any controversial quotes. The matter did not reach the Gulf press in Arabic until November 7 when an article was published in "Al-Siyasia al-Kuwaitiya" reacting to al-Nuaimi's warnings that the church decision did not have popular acceptance. The author, the liberal former dean of Islamic studies at Qatar University, Dr. Abdel Hamid al-Ansari, had sent his piece to papers in Qatar and the Gulf, but it was run only by the Kuwaiti paper and in the UAE; no Qatari paper printed it.

4. (C) Al-Ansari began his article saying, "People will think there is a dispute going on regarding this issue, while there is none. Qataris feel no insult in constructing a church in their country." He followed with the following points:

-- No legislation requires the approval of the Qatari people for the building of a church.

-- What harm is it to Qataris if churches are built in their country?

-- Qatar's constitution provides for freedom of religion.

-- Europe and the U.S. allow the building of mosques for their religious minorities.

-- No objection to the decision was made by Qatar's religious figures.

5. (C) In a meeting with P/E chief, al-Ansari expressed frustration that his article was not published in Qatar and more generally that he is not allowed to reach out to a wide audience here. He says that he is a supporter of many of the government's policies, for example in partnering with the U.S. in national defense. He believes that such policies are in the best interest of his country -- but he is not allowed to voice these views widely. By contrast, he said that Dr. Yousef al-Qaradawi is given free rein to voice his anti-American views, even though the views do not conform to Qatari policy. Al-Ansari believes that Qaradawi's popularity is due in large part to the fact that he has access to a large audience. He said he could make headway in changing certain conservative and intolerant views if he were granted the same support.

COMMENT

16. (C) Whether Qataris indeed would welcome the churches or whether the conservative point of view would prevail is not the key question: It is our view that educated thinkers accept the idea of churches from several points of view, including the practical one that 80% of the country's labor force is foreign. More traditional segments of society might not like the idea but would fall in line behind the Amir. Even a Salafi-oriented official charged with facilitating the churches' licenses befriended the Catholic community's spokesman and helped speed up the process. Rather, the key point is that the discussion was not allowed to take place and average Qataris lost the opportunity to voice their opinions and develop the feeling that they have a role in shaping the country. As Dr. al-Ansari knows, the government, which effectively controls the press, did not allow his article to appear because it would spark just such a dialogue.

UNTERMEYER